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The Historical Evolution of Christianity in Pakistan: Missionary Influence, Caste Dynamics, and the Challenge of Theological Contextualization

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Abstract

This study explores the historical development, socio-economic struggles, and identity challenges of Pakistani Christians from the pre-colonial period to the present day. It examines the role of missionary expansion, particularly the *chūhrā* mass movement (1868–1931), which shaped the demographic and social structure of the Christian community. The study highlights the impact of caste-based discrimination, economic marginalization, and denominational fragmentation, which have reinforced internal divisions and hindered social mobility. Following Partition, issues such as land dispossession and limited employment opportunities further entrenched Christians in sanitation work, reinforcing societal stereotypes. Additionally, the study addresses the complexity of Christian identity, which is shaped by religion, ethnicity, and nationality, yet remains unresolved due to social exclusion and Western influences. The research underscores the need for theological contextualization, social integration, and economic empowerment to foster a more unified and resilient Christian community in Pakistan.

***Keywords*:** *chūhrā* mass movement, Christian identity, denominational fragmentation, economic marginalization, Punjabi Christians, theological contextualization

Introduction

The Christian church in Pakistan exhibits diversity in denominations, cultural contexts, and socio-economic backgrounds, making it difficult to generalize Christianity in the country. Fr. Emmanuel Asi (b.1949) emphasizes that the church struggles to establish a distinct identity as the "Pakistani Church." He advocates instead for more time and effort to be dedicated to exploring and articulating regional identities, such as the *Punjabi*, *Sindhi*, and *Baluchi* churches, rather than adopting a generalized and ambiguous national identity.[1] He further argues that identity consists of three aspects: religious, national, and ethnic. Among these, ethnic identity is the strongest and most relevant in the context of Christianity in Pakistan.[2] Therefore, a proper understanding of Christianity in Pakistan necessitates an examination of the socio-cultural and historical context in which the Christian community exists. The community in Pakistan is broadly divided into two major socio-economic classes: (a) Anglo-Indians, the Goan community, and middle-class individuals; and (b) the socio-economically marginalized or downtrodden. The first group, often Westernized, does not strongly identify with Pakistan and tends to equate Christianity with Westernization. Many have

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[1]Emmanuel Asi, "Liberation Theology: A Pakistani Perspectives," *Logos* 28, no. 1 (1989), 1.

[2]Emmanuel Asi, interviewed by Farman Ali, Loyola Hall Research Center, Lahore, January 5, 2019

successfully obtained political asylum in Western countries, while others actively seek to do so.[3] Robert Andreas Butler (1902-1982) notes that this group, engaged in business and social relations with Muslims, is often perceived as indistinct from foreign Christians and lacks a strong Pakistani cultural identity.[4]

The second group, which constitutes the vast majority—approximately nine-tenths—of Pakistan's Christian population, comprises individuals from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, primarily engaged in menial labor such as sweeping. They are often derogatorily referred to as *chūhrā* Christians—a term historically associated with Punjabi Christians from the lowest strata of the caste hierarchy, originally linked to the Hindu Dalit caste system.[5] The divisions within the Christian community are further exacerbated by intra-faith differences. Educated and affluent Christians often distance themselves from the laboring class, deepening existing social fractures.[6] The historical legacy of Christianity in Pakistan, particularly its association with colonial powers, further complicates its identity. Missionaries often conflated Christianity with Western civilization, introducing Western traditions such as Christmas trees, Santa Claus, and Western names for children. These practices reinforced the perception—both among Muslims and within the Christian community itself—that Christianity is inherently Western.[7]

Demographically, Christians in Pakistan constitute approximately 3.3 million, making up 1.37% of the total population. In Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Christians account for 134,884 individuals (0.33% of the population), while Punjab hosts the largest Christian population, numbering 2,458,924 (1.93%). Sindh has 546,968 Christians (0.98%), Baluchistan 62,731 (0.43%), and Islamabad 97,281 (4.26%).[8] These figures illustrate the uneven distribution of Christians across the country, with Punjab having the highest concentration and Islamabad having the highest percentage relative to its population.

Christians in Punjab have been the most extensively studied segment of this community. Andrew Gordon's *Our India Mission* (1886) provided an in-depth analysis of the *chūhrā* and *megs* communities, who occupied the lowest positions in the caste hierarchy and were largely engaged in scavenging and other menial tasks.[9] Frederick and Margaret Stock's *People Movements in the Punjab* (1975) examined church growth in post-1947 Pakistan, focusing on the United Presbyterian Mission's efforts. Their study contrasts individual evangelism with group-movement approaches, particularly among the *megs* and *chūhrā* communities, identifying factors that influenced church growth and

[3]For detail see: Dominic Moghal, "Alienation of Local People: Future of Religious Minorities in Pakistan," *al-Musheer* 36, no. 4 (1994), 128; 125-146.

[4]Robert Andreas Butler, "Note on Christian Muslim Dialogue," in *Trying to Respond*, ed., M. Ikram Chaghatai, (Lahore: Pakistan Jesuit Society Lahore, 1994), 327.

[5]Butler, "Note on Christian Muslim Dialogue," 327.

[6]News from the Country," *al-Musheer* 24, no. 4 (1982), 168.

[7]Farman Ali, "Contemporizing Christian Theological Trends in Pakistan: An Analytical Critique of Christian Discourses Since 1970." (Unpublished PhD Dissertation: University of Management and Technology, Lahore, 2020), 160-61.

[8]Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 7th Population and Housing Census 2023 (Islamabad: Ministry of Planning Development and Special Initiatives, 2023), 68. https://www.pbs.gov.pk/sites/default/files/population/2023/Key_Findings_Report.pdf. Accessed on January 01, 2025.

[9]Andrew Gordon, *Our India Mission: A Thirty Years' History of the India Mission of the United Presbyterian Church of North America; Together with Personal Reminiscences* (Philadelphia: Inquirer Printing Co., 1886).

offering principles for modern outreach. Though geographically limited, their insights have broader applicability for church planting across South Asia.[10]

John O'Brien's works, *The Construction of Pakistani Christian Identity* (2006) and *The Unconquered People* (2012), provide crucial insights into the transformation of the *chūhrā* community into Punjabi Christians. Despite extensive research, gaps remain in understanding how historical, social, and religious elements collectively shaped Christian identity, faith practices, and community dynamics in a postcolonial context. To address these gaps, this study is structured into three sections. The first section explores Christianity's pre-colonial presence, including the St. Thomas tradition and Mughal-era Catholic missions. The second examines British missionary expansion and the *chūhrā* mass movement (1868–1931), which significantly reshaped Christian identity. The final section analyzes Christianity in present-day Pakistan, focusing on socio-political challenges, interfaith relations, and community contributions. This study aims to provide a comprehensive perspective on the evolution of Christianity in Pakistan within both historical and contemporary frameworks.

2. Christianity's Pre-Colonial Presence

Christianity is a missionary religion, and its presence in non-European parts of the world is rooted in the commandments of Jesus, such as *"Go and make disciples of all the nations,*[11] a directive known as the Great Commission in Christian theology. However, missionary activities were influenced not only by human nature, circumstances, time, and space but also by the personal characteristics of the missionaries themselves. Each missionary understood and articulated their mission differently, and developments in the mission field largely depended on their presuppositions about mission and faith. These human presuppositions are essential for understanding the development, origins, and future of Christianity in Pakistan.

2.1.St. Thomas Tradition

The origins of Christianity in India and the surrounding regions, including present-day Pakistan, have been a subject of debate among historians, archaeologists, and Christian theologians due to the lack of documentary evidence about its early history. This controversy has divided scholars into two groups.

The first group argues that Christianity in the Indian subcontinent can be traced back to 47 CE with the missionary activities of Apostle Thomas (d. 72 CE).[12] This perspective is commonly referred to as the St. Thomas Tradition of the Thomas Christians. Advocates of this tradition assert that there are strong oral traditions regarding Apostle Thomas's missionary work and martyrdom in South India. Additionally, some scholars claim that Thomas visited the Indo-Parthian Kingdom during the first century, during the reign of an Indo-Parthian king, whose capital was Taxila (now in modern-day Pakistan).[13] However, the second group of scholars argues that the first known Christian to arrive in the region of Gilgit (in modern-day Pakistan) was a monk in the 7th century CE, rather than Apostle

[10]Frederick Stock, and Margaret Stock, *People Movements in the Punjab* (South Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1975).

[11]*Matthew* 28:19.

[12]St. Thomas, (d.) as some early Christian sources told, was the twin brother of Jesus, the son of Marry. For full detail see: Bart Denton Ehrman, *Lost scriptures: Books that did not Make it into the New Testament* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 122-23.

[13]Stephen Neil, *A History of Christianity in India: The Beginning to AD* 1707 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 26-30.

Thomas.[14] According to this view, the Christian monk undertook his journey alongside Hindu ascetics during a period when monasticism in Christianity was at its peak, with monks traveling across the world in search of spiritual truth.[15]

While both groups present substantial arguments, no archeological or textual evidence confirms the existence of a continuous Christian community in the region from that period. Bishop W. G. Young, a Korean theologian and church historian, who served in Pakistan for several years and taught church history at various seminaries, including Gujranwala Theological Seminary[16], questioned the historicity of the St. Thomas tradition. He criticized the Acts of Thomas, describing it as "the most idiotic book" and argued that its teachings do not represent the genuine teachings of Christ. He further asserted that no historical evidence supports the claim that Thomas visited India.[17] Similarly, Ashkenaz Asif, dismissed the first phase of Christianity in the region as practically insignificant, stating that no evidence exists of the continuity of any early Christian community or its teachings in Pakistan.[18] Despite these academic disputes surrounding the St. Thomas tradition and the Taxila Cross (a Christian relic found in Pakistan), Pakistani church historians continue to adhere to the belief that Christianity in Pakistan traces back to the time of St. Thomas and the Taxila Cross. This belief was institutionalized in 1970 when the Church of Pakistan was established and adopted the Taxila Cross as its official symbol. This choice was meant to emphasize that Christianity in Pakistan is not a recent development but has historical roots extending back to the early centuries of the Christian era.[19]

2.2.Advent of Roman Catholic Missionaries in Mughal Period

In the late 16th century, the Portuguese established trade contacts with India by seizing Goa and making it their commercial hub, as silk and spices commanded high prices in the European market. Seeing the economic and strategic importance of these colonies, King João III (r. 1521–1557) requested the Jesuit Order to send missionaries to spread Christianity in his territories. In response, the Jesuits sent Francis Xavier (1506–1552) as the first missionary to India.[20]

2.2.1. Francis Xavier's Missionary Approach

Xavier initiated an active Christian mission in India, particularly in Goa, and later expanded into Southeast Asia. Initially, he viewed Hinduism and Islam as erroneous religions, believing that his mission was to replace them rather than understand them. However, his experiences in the region led him to adjust his approach. To better engage with local communities, he adopted certain indigenous practices, such as using local languages and attire while preaching Christianity. In 1543, he translated

[14]For further detail see: John Rooney, *St. Thomas and Taxila: A Symposium on Saint Thomas* (Rawalpindi: Christian Study Center, 1988), 9-14.

[15]For brief detail of these monastic activities see: Michael Collins and Mathew A. Price, eds., *The Story of Christianity: 2000 years of Faith* (London: Dorling Kindersley Limited, 2003), 66-68.

[16]For full detail see: Farman Ali, Faryal Umbreen, and Raheela Imtiaz, "The Gujranwala Theological Seminary's Education System and its Influence on Community Leadership and Social Engagement," *GUMAN*, 7 (3), (2024): 463–495. Retrieved from https://guman.com.pk/index.php/GUMAN/article/view/865.

[17]W. G. Young, "Apostle Thomas and his Acts," (Urdu article) *al-Musheer* 5, no. 3 & 4 (1972), 100-105.

[18]Ashkanaz Asif, interviewed by Farman Ali, Christian Study Center, Rawalpindi, January 22, 2019.

[19]John Rooney, *Shadows in the Dark: A History of Christianity in Pakistan up to the 10th Century* (Rawalpindi: Christian Study Center, 1984), 43.

[20]Justo L. Gonzalez, *The story of Christianity: The Early Church to the Dawn of the Reformation,* Vol.1. (Harper San Francisco: HarperCollins Publisher, 1984), 403-04.

key Christian texts into the Malabar language, including the Catechism and the Lord's Prayer. By 1554, the entire Bible had been translated into Tamil. Despite these efforts to indigenize Christianity, Xavier opposed the use of indigenous languages in church services—especially Syriac, which he believed was associated with heresy. He also emphasized the superiority of European culture, renaming converts with French or Portuguese names. His missionary efforts included composing religious songs in vernacular languages, such as the famous "Ramban Song" in 1601.[21] Many converts during this period accepted Christianity as a means of social mobility, seeking refuge under the Portuguese caste system or aspiring to become Portuguese subjects by embracing their religion. Thus, conversion had an additional dimension of social liberation, offering an escape from the rigid hierarchical structures of Indian society that had persecuted them for centuries.

2.2.2. Robert de Nobili's Indigenization Efforts

Robert de Nobili (1577–1656), another Jesuit missionary, sought a different approach to evangelism in India, focusing on adapting Christianity to local customs and targeting high-caste Hindus. Arriving in Goa in 1605, he observed that Hindu elites associated Christianity with the Portuguese lower classes, who consumed beef, wine, and interacted with untouchables. This negative perception discouraged Hindu converts from embracing the faith.[22] To counter this, Nobili adopted a Brahmin-like lifestyle, refraining from consuming beef, fish, and wine and dressing in the yellow robe and turban of a Sanyasi (Hindu ascetic). He became proficient in Sanskrit and Tamil, making him one of the first European scholars to engage deeply with Hindu scriptures.

However, Nobili's indigenization efforts sparked controversy. He allowed converts to retain their caste status, use Hindu symbols (such as the sacred thread and sandalwood marks), and participate in traditional Hindu ceremonies, including marriages and purification rituals. Fellow missionaries criticized his methods, arguing that they encouraged idolatry and syncretism. The Goa Inquisition launched an investigation into Nobili's practices, but in 1623, the Vatican ruled in his favor, permitting the use of Hindu cultural elements in Christian rituals—provided they were first blessed by Christian priests. Despite this temporary success, his mission suffered setbacks after Pope Clement XII issued a papal edict in 1736, banning the use of Hindu customs and symbols in Christianity. As a result, many high-caste Hindu converts abandoned Christianity, leading to a decline in Jesuit influence in India. By the 1760s, the Portuguese government suppressed the Jesuit mission, and the Jesuits were unable to resume their work until 1860.[23]

2.2.3. Jesuit Missions to the Mughal Court

The Jesuits also attempted to convert the Mughal emperors to Christianity by sending missions to the Mughal court. Emperor Akbar (1542–1605), known for his religious tolerance and syncretic beliefs, frequently invited Jesuit missionaries to his court. Akbar sought to synthesize elements of Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Zoroastrianism, leading to the creation of a new religious ideology called *dīn-i-ilāhī* (religion of God). Jesuit missionaries believed Akbar's openness to religious dialogue indicated his potential conversion to Christianity. However, as Makhanlal Rychoudhury explains: "Akbar's sympathetic attitude and the respect shown to father Aquaviva were mistaken by the fathers who had only the knowledge of European religious intolerance of the 16th century and

[21]Farman Ali, and Humaira Ahmad, "Contextualizing Christian theology in South Asia: An Analytical Study from 1542-1947," *Journal of Islamic Thought and Civilization* 9, no. 2 (2019): 277–78.

[22]Justo L. Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity: The Early Church to the Dawn of the Reformation,* Vol.1, (Harper San Francisco: HarperCollins Publisher, 1984), 404-05.

[23]Farman Ali, and Humaira Ahmad, "Contextualizing Christian theology in South Asia: An analytical study from 1542-1947," 278–82.

who could not dream of such liberalism of a non-Christian unless he was a confirmed believers of the doctrines of Christianity."[24]

For about 50 years (1579–1628), during the reigns of Akbar and Jahangir (1569–1627), the Jesuits maintained a presence at the Mughal court, building churches in Lahore and Agra and establishing schools. However, despite their efforts, the number of converts remained minimal. Most converts lived in Goa, where they enjoyed Portuguese protection.[25] Later, Aurangzeb (1618–1707), Jahangir's grandson, opposed Christian missionary activities, ultimately expelling Jesuits from Mughal territories. Under Akbar, missionaries had been allowed to preach freely and build churches, yet by 1653, a Jesuit mission report recorded only 30 baptisms, with an annual average of 25 conversions. By the late 17th century, the total Christian population in Mughal India was estimated at 600 people, and by 1784, the Catholic Church had only around 1,000 adherents. As John O'Brien states that in a mission annual report of 1653, it is stated that there were only 30 baptisms. As time went on, they fell to an average of 25 per year and by the late 17th century the total number was estimated to be 600. By the mid-18th century numbers of converts were insignificant. In 1784 they estimated a church of 1000 souls."[26]

2.2.4. Limited Impact of Portuguese Missions in Present-Day Pakistan

Although Roman Catholic missionaries made early attempts to establish Christianity in India, they failed to establish lasting Christian communities in what is now Pakistan. British imperialism, rather than Portuguese missions, played the primary role in the growth of Christianity in the Indian subcontinent. As Freda Carey noted "there is no known Christian community within the borders of present-day Pakistan whose conversions can be linked to the Portuguese missions in India or the reign of Emperor Akbar."[27] Most of today's Pakistani Christian population originates from Protestant missionary efforts that began in the 19th century, rather than Catholic missions of the Mughal period. The formation of Christian communities in present-day Pakistan started with the arrival of American Presbyterian missionary John Cameron Lowrie (1808–1900) in Ludhiana in 1834. His mission laid the groundwork for further Protestant missionary activities, which will be discussed in Section 2.

3. Mission under British Colonialism and the *Chūhrā* Movement (1868–1931)

Protestant missionary work in India began in 1706, primarily in South India. However, before 1833, the British East India Company was largely suspicious and hostile toward missionary activities, fearing that proselytization among the local population would cause disturbances in its territories and interfere with trade interests. In 1833, when the Company's charter was up for renewal before the British Parliament, Evangelical Christians in England successfully lobbied for a clause permitting unrestricted missionary activities in India. This legal shift allowed missionaries from various nations to enter India freely, leading to the expansion of Protestant missions across the subcontinent. Among the earliest Protestant missionaries in Punjab was John Lowrie (1808–1900) of the Punjab Mission, associated with the Presbyterian Church in the USA (American Presbyterian Mission).[28] Lowrie began his mission in Ludhiana in 1834. By the 1850s, three more major Protestant missions were established in Punjab: The Church Missionary Society (CMS), the United Presbyterian Church of North America, and the Church of Scotland. These missions, along with the Lodiana Mission,

[24]Makhanlal Roychoudhury Sastri, *Din-i-Ilāhī* (Calcutta: The University of Calcutta, 1941), 178.

[25]John Rooney, *The Hesitant Dawn: Christianity in Pakistan 1579-1760* (Rawalpindi: Christian Study Center, 1984) 31-70.

[26]John O'Brien, *The Construction of Pakistani Christian Identity* (Lahore: Research Society of Pakistan, University of the Punjab, 2006), 550.

[27]Freda M. Carey, *Dalit, Dhimmīs or Disciple,* 12.

[28]James Massey, *Punjab: The Movement of the Sprit* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1996), 2.

became the largest and most influential Protestant efforts in Punjab. Over time, additional groups such as the American Methodists, the Salvation Army, the New Zealand Presbyterians, the Seventh-day Adventists, and various Pentecostal groups joined the missionary work.[29]

Following the British annexation of Sindh in 1843 and Punjab in 1849, mission stations rapidly expanded into new cities. The American Presbyterians established mission stations in Jullundur in 1847, Lahore in 1849, and Rawalpindi in 1856. The Church Missionary Society initiated work in Karachi in 1850, Amritsar in 1851, Peshawar in 1854, and Hyderabad (Sindh) and Multan in 1856. Meanwhile, the United Presbyterians began their mission in Sialkot in 1855, with the Church of Scotland joining them in 1857. One of the most influential figures of this era was Charles Forman (1821–1894), the founder of Forman Christian College, Lahore. Along with John Newton (d. 1880) of the American Presbyterian Mission, Forman established one of the first major mission stations in Lahore in 1849.[30]

In the early years, Protestant missionaries in Punjab, following the conversion model of Robert de Nobili, focused on high-caste Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs. They believed that if elite individuals converted to Christianity, the rest of society would follow their example.[31] However, this individual conversion approach achieved limited success, as very few high-caste individuals embraced Christianity. Despite the low number of converts, these individuals played a crucial role in shaping Christian-Muslim relations in 19th-century Punjab. Many educated converts, who had received training from missionary schools, colleges, and seminaries, engaged in theological debates with non-Christians. They defended Christianity while criticizing Islamic teachings, leading to the development of polemical literature. Among the most prominent figures in these debates were Abdullah Athim (d. 1896), Safdar Ali (d. 1899), Imad ul Din Lahiz (d. 1900), Rajab Ali, G. L. Thakur Das (1852–1910), Talib ul Din (d. 1917), and Master Ram Chandar (d. 1880).[32] These polemical writings reinforced religious divisions, fostering an "us versus them" mentality between Christians and non-Christians, particularly among Muslims in Punjab. This sectarian divide further fueled suspicion toward missionary institutions, which were perceived as centers of proselytization rather than neutral educational establishments.

Despite resistance from local populations, missionary activities expanded rapidly, especially in education. By 1853, Christian missions had established 1,668 missionary schools serving 96,177 students, while British colonial authorities had only 404 government schools with 25,362 students. Missionaries explicitly designed these institutions to promote Christianity, aiming to convert non-Christians and solidify the faith of new Christian adherents. This imbalance in educational opportunities further fueled local anxieties about foreign religious influence. Although missionaries

[29]John C.B. Webster, "Christianity in the Punjab," *Missiology*: *An International Review* 6:4 (1978), 469.

[30]Neill, *A History of Christianity in India, 1707-1858*, 462-467.

[31]Stock, *People Movement in the Punjab*, 20.

[32]To see the writings of these personalities, see: Farman Ali, "Christian-Muslim Relations in the Second Half of 19th Century India in View of Syed Nāṣir-ul-Dīn Muḥammad Abūlmanṣūr Dehlvī (d. 1903)," *Journal of Islamic Thought and Civilization* 13, no. 2 (2023): 152–163. https://doi.org/10.32350/jitc.132.10; Farman Ali, and Humaira Ahmad. "Early Christian Sirah writings of Subcontinent: A Comparative Study of their Methods, Impact and Cogitating on new Contemporizing Methodology,*" Journal of Islamic Thought and Civilization* 8, no. 1 (2018): 129–143; Farman Ali and Humaira Ahmad, "A Study of the Inter-Religious Dialogue through Syed Ahmad's Reconciliatory Approaches in Tabīn-ul-Kalām," *Al-Milal Journal of Religion and Thought* 3 no. 1 (2021):168-189.

achieved some success among high-caste Hindus and Muslims, their greatest breakthrough came in the 1880s when large numbers of *chūhrā* and *megh* castes embraced Christianity.[33]

3.1.Mission among the *Chūhrā*

Between 1875 and 1930, missionary efforts led to the conversion of at least 90% of Punjab's present-day Christian community, primarily from the *chūhrā* and Megh castes. These conversions occurred in large groups rather than individually, prompting scholars to describe it as a "Mass Movement."[34] Scholars have referred to this phenomenon in different ways: Thakur Das (1880–1930) described it as the, "history of the Christian movement," Margaret and Stock used the term, "*chūhrā* movement," John C.B. Webster and John Rooney also referred to it as the "*chūhrā* mass conversions," and James Messy called it the "Holy Spirit Movement." A 1927 Church Missionary Society survey defined a mass movement as "the collective conversion of families or communities rather than isolated individuals." This approach significantly shaped Punjab's Christian demographic, especially among lower-caste groups.[35]

The *chūhrā*, also known as sweepers, were the largest lower-caste group in Punjab, numbering over one million according to the 1881 Census Report.[36] Historically, they were engaged in occupations such as scavenging, leatherworking, and agricultural labor.[37] Chūhrā movement began with the conversion of an illiterate man named Ditt from a village near Sialkot. Ditt approached Rev. D. Samuel Martin (b. 1825–) to baptize him. Despite facing family opposition, Ditt remained steadfast in his faith and worked to persuade his relatives and neighbors to convert. Within a year, he brought his wife, daughter, uncle, and several neighbors to Sialkot for baptism. Missionary records estimate that nearly 500 people from his caste converted to Christianity through his efforts. By 1900, half of his community had embraced Christianity, and by 1915, almost all *chūhrā* in the Sialkot district had converted.[38]

From Sialkot, Gujranwala, and Gurdaspur, the *chūhrā* movement expanded rapidly. Thousands from the caste converted to Christianity, leading missionaries to shift their focus from urban centers to rural areas.[39] At first, most of the evangelistic work was done by the *chūhrā* converts themselves, while the missionaries devoted their energies to educate and train those who had converted Christianity. The United Presbyterian (UP) Mission, for instance, decided in 1877 to focus on rural evangelism among the *chūhrā*, leading to remarkable growth. Between 1881 and 1891, the number of baptized Christians in their mission surged from 660 to 10,165.[40] By the 1890s, British engineers developed a network of irrigation canals across Punjab, leading to mass migrations of Christian *chūhrā* into newly settled regions. The government allocated land to Christian missions, allowing new Christian villages to emerge, such as *Martinpur*, *Youngsonabad*, and *Khushpur*. These new settlements not only provided economic opportunities for *chūhrā* converts but also helped Christianity take root in Punjab.[41]

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[33]Farman Ali, Faryal Umbreen, and Raheela Imtiaz, "The Gujranwala Theological Seminary's Education System and its Influence on Community Leadership and Social Engagement," 464. https://guman.com.pk/index.php/GUMAN/article/view/865.

[34]John O'Brien, *The Construction of Pakistani Christian Identity*, 554.

[35]Huma Pervaiz, and Tahir Mehmood, "Mass Conversion to Christianity: A Case Study of *Chūhrā* Community in Sialkot District (18801930*),*" *Pakistan Vision* 19, 1 (2018): 41-42, 40-59.

[36]Stock, *People Movement in Punjab*, 61.

[37]O'Brien, *The Construction of Pakistani Christian Identity*, 3-10.

[38]Massey, *Punjab: The Dalit Christians*, 47-48.

[39]Stock, *People Movement in the Punjab*, 67.

[40]Ibid., 68.

[41]Webster, *The Dalit Christians*, 50.

While some missions actively engaged with the *chūhrā* mass movement, others were more hesitant, fearing that converts were motivated by material benefits associated with colonial rule, such as land and employment. These individuals, often pejoratively referred to as "Rice Christians," were accused of converting for economic gain rather than genuine faith. This skepticism also extended to individual ministries, where some Pakistani Christians sought funding from NGOs and Para-Church organizations by opening independent ministries. Initially, missionaries were concerned that baptizing *chūhrā* would discourage conversions among higher castes, particularly Hindus and Muslims. However, over time, it became evident that the *chūhrā* conversions had no discernible impact on the conversion rate of upper-caste Hindus and Muslims.[42]

Despite the growing momentum of the *chūhrā* movement, its expansion inadvertently led to the decline of a smaller Christian movement among the Megh community. Although both the *chūhrā* and Megh belonged to the lower castes, the *Megh*, as weavers, considered themselves socially superior to the *chūhrā*, who were primarily sanitary workers and scavengers. Margaret and Frederick Stock highlight this phenomenon, noting that as large numbers of *chūhrā* entered the Church, the *Megh* hesitated, fearing close association with those lower in the caste hierarchy. This social dynamic created an unexpected barrier to conversions among the *Megh*.[43]

By the mid-1880s, the sheer number of *chūhrā* converts overwhelmed missionary efforts, as many missions lacked the staff and strategies needed to disciple large numbers of illiterate converts. Consequently, the United Presbyterian Mission (UP Mission) relied on *chūhrā* rural evangelists, such as Ditt, to teach the fundamentals of the Christian faith. Although many of these evangelists had little formal education, they were instrumental in teaching new converts the Catechism, the Lord's Prayer, the Ten Commandments, and other passages of Scripture. The rapid influx of *chūhrā* converts also shifted the focus of missionary education. Previously, missionary schools were concentrated in urban areas, targeting upper-caste Hindus and Muslims, as it was believed that these groups would only be attracted to Christianity through high-quality education. Miller emphasizing the importance of education among Hindu high castes states:

> Indian Church was still to all intents and purposes a foreign church, and that it would remain so as long as Hindus of the higher castes, who are the real representatives of India, remain untouched by Christianity. India could never be won for Christ, if it is the lower castes or outcastes who are relied upon. The higher castes must be reached, and the only way of reaching these classes is by diffusing Christian influence amongst them by means of educational institutions providing the very highest education.[44]

As a result, the educational approach shifted, with new schools established in both rural and urban areas to cater to *chūhrā* converts. The goal was not only to evangelize high-caste Hindus but also to provide basic Christian and general education to the children of the *chūhrā*, helping to develop and train future Christian leaders.[45] Missionaries also prioritized the Punjabi language for Bible instruction, rather than Urdu, which was considered more prestigious and was the language of the educated elite. [46] The decision to use Punjabi was crucial in helping the largely illiterate *chūhrā* Christians connect with their faith. Additionally, Imam Din Shahbaz (1845–1921) paraphrased the Psalms into Punjabi verse, setting them to indigenous musical tunes. His Punjabi Psalter remains a cornerstone of Christian worship in Pakistan today. Even the musical instruments used in worship,

[42]Pieter H. Streefland, *The Sweepers of Slaughterhouse: Conflict and Survival in a Karachi Neighborhood* (Assen, Netherlands: Van Gorcum, 1979), 9.

[43]Stock, *People Movement in the Punjab,* 55-56.

[44]W. H. T. Gairdner, *Edinburgh 1910: An Account and Interpretation of World Missionary Conference* (Edinburgh, London: O. Anderson & Ferrier, 1910), 122.

[45]Stock, *People Movement in the Punjab,* 81-82, 90.

[46]Ibid., 120.

such as the harmonium and *tablā* (drum), are considered sacred, while modern instruments like the guitar are discouraged among traditional Christian communities. [47] Eric Sarwar attributes this to Islamic influence, arguing that once a tradition is established in South Asian religious culture, it is difficult to change.[48]

During the 1890s, British engineers created an extensive canal system in Punjab, opening vast tracts of previously barren land for cultivation. This development led to new settlements, helping to alleviate overpopulation in older districts. Many *chūhrā*, including some who had already converted to Christianity, migrated as farm laborers, working for Muslim, Sikh, or Hindu landlords. Thousands settled in the area between the Chenab and Ravi rivers, known as Jhang Bar. Missionaries and pastors followed these migrations, ensuring that the Christian message continued to spread among the *chūhrā* in the canal colonies.[49] The non-Christian *chūhrā* in these newly developed areas also proved responsive to Christianity, further accelerating church growth.[50]

Recognizing this demographic shift, the British colonial government allocated land in the new canal colonies to Christian missions, enabling the resettlement of landless *chūhrā* converts.[51] In 1898, land was granted to the Church Missionary Society, leading to the establishment of Christian villages such as *Montgomerywala* and *'Īsā Nagrī* (Batemanabad) in Jhang Bar.[52] Other Christian communities were settled in *Youngsonabad* (Sheikhupura district) under the Church of Scotland, while the United Presbyterian village of *Martinpur* and the Roman Catholic village of *Khushpur* were founded around the same time.[53] Additional settlements emerged south of the Ravi River between 1914 and 1930, with nine more Christian villages established under various missions. These new Christian settlements provided both security and economic stability, leading to thousands of *chūhrā* migrating into these districts, many of whom adopted Christian identities. [54]

A fresh wave of church growth occurred between 1896 and 1904, particularly following a spiritual revival in 1896 that deeply influenced church leaders, pastors, and seminary students. [55] A second revival movement began in 1904, this time impacting ordinary believers through the Sialkot Convention, which some referred to as the "Keswick of India." [56] Initially, the convention was limited to missionaries and national workers, but in 1906, it expanded to include lay Christians from every

[47]Freda Carey, interviewed by Farman Ali, Open Theological Seminary, Lahore, January 8, 2019.

[48]Eric Sarwar, "Interfaith Peace Conference: Sacred Scriptures and Christian-Muslim Peacemaking," (Speakers comment, *Psalm in Christian of Pakistan*, February 16, 2019).

[49]The UP Mission opened new mission stations in Lyallpur (later renamed Faisalabad) in 1895, Hafiz-Abad in 1897, Khangah Dogran in 1900.

[50]Ibid., 118.

[51]Webster, *The Dalit Christians*, 61.

[52]The first Christian village had been founded by the CMS at Clarkabad, near Lahore in 1868; see: Stock, *People Movement in the Punjab*, 244.

[53]Stock, *People Movement in the Punjab,* 258; One village, Shantinagar, near Khanewal, was founded by the Salvation Army in 1916. Four villages in Montgomery district (later renamed Sahiwal), including Ransonabad, were founded by the Associate Reformed Presbyterian (ARP) Church of USA, in 1916 and 1924. Four villages were founded in the Multan area, including Stuntzabad, by the United Methodist Church of the USA in 1930. Many of these villages were named after missionaries e.g. Clark, Youngson, Martin, Bateman, Ranson, Stuntz.

[54]Stock, *People Movements in the Punjab*, 282.

[55]Ibid., 129-131.

[56]Warren Webster, "Pakistan," in The Church in Asia, ed., Donald E. Hoke (Chicago: Moody Press, 1975), 495.

Protestant denomination. Today, the Sialkot Convention remains the oldest Christian gathering in Pakistan, drawing thousands of Protestant Christians each year in September.[57]

4. The Church in Pakistan from 1930 to the Present Day

The Christian community in Pakistan has undergone distinct historical phases that have shaped its diverse and fragmented identity. British missionary expansion and the *chūhrā* mass movement (1868–1931) played a pivotal role in constructing Christian identity by emphasizing group conversions and community growth. However, as the Christian population expanded, socio-economic, denominational, and caste-based divisions became more pronounced. Over time, Westernized, middle-class Christians distanced themselves from marginalized *chūhrā* Christians, who remained confined to menial labor. For many Punjabi Christians, ethnic identity has often outweighed religious or national affiliation, further complicating their place in Pakistani society. These historical foundations set the stage for ongoing internal fragmentation and identity struggles in post-colonial Pakistan.

4.1.Denominational Fragmentation and Power Struggles

Internal divisions within the Christian community took on new forms in post-colonial Pakistan. While theological differences had historically shaped church structures, post-independence divisions were increasingly driven by power struggles and allegations of corruption rather than doctrine. For example, the Presbyterian Church, which had established its mission in India in the 1860s, was declared autonomous in 1961 and handed over to local leadership. However, under indigenous leadership, the church suffered multiple schisms—first in the 1960s and 1970s, then again in the 1990s, 2018, and 2021. These divisions led to the formation of parallel churches, some consisting of only a single presbytery member.[58] Beyond denominational disputes, caste-based divisions further fractured the Christian community. Even within church congregations, social hierarchies persisted, with elite Christians, including priests, distancing themselves from *chūhrā* Christians, who form the majority of Pakistan's Christian population. This exclusionary attitude can be traced back to the missionary era, where caste discrimination continued despite religious conversion. A 1938 report documented an instance in which a Christian priest refused to approve a marriage proposal solely because the woman belonged to the *chūhrā* caste. Such attitudes have endured over time, reinforcing internal barriers to unity and limiting social mobility within the Christian community.[59]

4.2.Caste-Based Marginalization and Economic Struggles

Caste-based discrimination in Pakistan is not just a social issue but also an economic one. The marginalization of *chūhrā* Christians is reinforced by occupational stereotypes, particularly in sanitation work and other menial labor. This occupational confinement can be traced back to Partition in 1947, when the mass migration of Hindu and Sikh landlords led to a redistribution of land. Before Partition, many Christians worked as tenant farmers or farm laborers under Hindu and Sikh landowners. However, as these landlords fled to India, their land was reassigned to Muslim refugees

[57]For further detail see: Farman Ali, "Christian-Muslim Religious Education and Society: A Comparative Study of Gujranwala Theological Seminary and Nuṣrat-ul-'Uloom Gujranwala," (M.Phil. Thesis: International Islamic University, Islamabad, 2012), 143.

[58]Isabel Ong, Pakistan's Presbyterians have united: reconciling will take time. Online available at:https://www.christianitytoday.com/2024/07/pakistan-presbyterian-church-unity-christian-persecution/. Accessed on March 12, 2025.

[59]Charandas, Hamāre khudwad masīḥ kī du'ā aur masīḥiyyat maṇ jāt pāt, [The Prayer of Our God Jesus and Class system in Christianity], *Nūr Afshāṇ* 66, 14 (1938), pp. 4-5.

from East Punjab, who preferred to cultivate the land themselves. As a result, many Christian laborers lost their livelihoods and were forced to migrate to cities in search of work.[60]

With limited opportunities and no alternative skills, displaced Christian laborers took up jobs as sweepers, an occupation historically associated with the *chūhrā* caste. This pattern was not unique to Pakistan; a similar trend was observed in India, where land reforms and the breakdown of the *jajmānī* system increased the economic insecurity of Dalit Christians. As John Webster notes, these developments further entrenched caste-based discrimination, reinforcing the perception of *chūhrā* Christians as belonging to the lowest socio-economic tier. The lack of land ownership, restricted employment opportunities, and enduring caste prejudice have kept many Pakistani Christians in poverty, limiting their ability to break free from their historical social position.[61]

4.3.Complexity of Christian Identity in Post-Colonial Pakistan

The historical and socio-economic challenges faced by Pakistani Christians have made identity construction a complex issue. Christian identity is shaped by a triad of religion, ethnicity, and nationality, yet none of these fully integrate them into mainstream Pakistani society. Religiously, Christians are often classified as *dhimmīs* (non-Muslim subjects under Islamic law), which prevents them from being recognized as equal citizens in Pakistan. The Ulama's emphasis on their status as *dhimmīs* discourages Christians from embracing religion as their primary identity marker, as doing so would reinforce their subordinate position in Pakistani society. On the other hand, relying on ethnic identity presents its own challenges, as caste-based prejudices remain deeply ingrained. Within Pakistan's high-class ethnic discourse, the term *chūhrā* is often used as a derogatory synonym for "sweeper," reinforcing deep-seated stigma. As a result, embracing ethnicity as a primary identity marker perpetuates negative stereotypes, further marginalizing the Christian community. Adopting national identity as the sole basis for identity formation is equally problematic. While national integration might seem like an ideal solution, it risks erasing Christianity's missionary heritage and colonial history—both of which have historically shaped its presence in Pakistan. The struggle for identity remains unresolved, as religious, ethnic, and national identity markers each carry social limitations and consequences. The lack of indigenous and contextual theology, coupled with the adoption of Western cultural norms, further distances Christians from mainstream society. As a result, they remain marginalized both within their own community and in broader Pakistani society.

The complexities of Christian identity in Pakistan have been explored in several studies, including Freda Carry's master's thesis, *Dalit, Dhimmīs, or Disciples*? (1999). Carry highlights how caste-based discrimination, denominational fragmentation, and identity ambiguity continue to shape the Christian experience in Pakistan. These issues remain critical for understanding the challenges of Pakistani Christians today and underscore the need for a contextualized theology that can address their unique socio-religious position.[62]

4.4.Lack of Contextualization of Theology in Pakistan

Given the historical marginalization of Pakistani Christians, the development of an indigenous and contextual theology is crucial for fostering a sense of belonging. Many Christian communities in Pakistan continue to practice Westernized forms of worship, often creating a disconnect with mainstream Pakistani culture. While some efforts have been made to adapt Christian worship and spirituality to local traditions, theological contextualization remains limited. A more culturally rooted Christian theology is needed—one that reflects the historical, social, and economic realities of

[60]Webster, *The Dalit Christian,* 167.

[61]Stock*, People Movement in the Punjab*, 181; Streefland*, The Sweepers of Slaughterhouse*, 10; Freda Carey, *Dalit, Dhimmīs or Disciple?* 5-35.

[62]Freda Carey. *Dalit, Dhimmīs or Disciple?* 2-65.

Pakistani Christians. One of the most visible efforts at contextualization is in Christian worship. Many Protestant churches in Punjab have adapted the Eucharist by using grape juice instead of wine and rotī (flatbread) instead of wafers, aligning with local food traditions. In contrast, Catholic churches in Sindh have incorporated elements from Hindu traditions, such as *artī, parsād, namaskār*, and *agarbattis* (incense sticks), which Protestant communities reject as non-Christian influences. Language remains another significant barrier to full contextualization. Despite the promotion of Punjabi in church music, no church conducts the Eucharist in Punjabi, maintaining a linguistic disconnect between worship and local identity. Additionally, worship varies by class and location—urban upper-class churches adhere to Western traditions, while rural and lower-class churches observe barefoot entry, gender segregation, and purification rituals. Some contextual theologians argue that urban churches should integrate rural customs to foster inclusivity and cultural relevance.[63]

Another area of contextualization is Marian devotion, particularly in Punjab. The shrine culture at Maryamabad has shaped a localized expression of faith, integrating folk practices such as langar (free food), *nazrāny* (offerings), candle lighting, incense burning, and folk performances like *bhangrā* and *luddī*. However, despite these local devotional elements, Marian imagery remains Western, as Catholic theologians resist modifying traditional artistic representations. Efforts to explain Marian doctrines, such as the Immaculate Conception and Perpetual Virginity, using Islamic sources (Qur'ān and Hadīth) have not been widely accepted, as many scholars view this approach as forced exegesis. A more recent shift, influenced by liberation theology, presents Mary as an earthly figure rather than the Queen of Heaven, making her more relatable to local believers. To bridge theological gaps among denominations, the study suggests organizing a Marian convention similar to the Sialkot Convention, a major Christian gathering in Pakistan.[64]

Christian feminism in Pakistan is also an emerging but underdeveloped field. While women have been enrolled in theological institutes as students and scripture teachers, they cannot perform ministerial roles in churches. Christian leaders argue that Pakistani society's patriarchal nature makes female priests socially unacceptable, leading to a gradual approach toward women's ordination. The Catholic Church categorically rejects women's ordination, though some prominent Catholic priests, such as John O'Brien and Emmanuel Asi, advocate for it. Unlike in the West, where Christian feminist theology is a well-established discipline, in Pakistan, the discussion remains focused on women's roles within the church, lacking engagement with broader feminist theological themes.[65]

One of the most significant contextual adaptations in Christian worship is the use of Punjabi *Psalms* (*Zabours*). Since singing Zabours is an integral part of worship in Pakistan, they have been contextualized through Punjabi poetic and musical traditions. This adaptation helps bridge the gap between Christian and Muslim communities, as the poetic beauty and spiritual depth of the Psalms resonate across religious lines.[66] However, despite the acceptance of Punjabi language in church music, its exclusion from the Eucharist and formal liturgy continues to create a divide between worship and cultural identity. Despite these efforts at contextualization, the lack of a fully developed theological framework continues to hinder Pakistani Christians from feeling a strong sense of belonging in their own country. The persistence of Westernized worship traditions, theological rigidity, and class-based divisions alienates many local Christians. A more culturally integrated

[63]Farman Ali, "The Contextualisation of Christian Eucharistic Worship in Pakistan," *Practical Theology* 16, 1 (2022): 82–94. doi:10.1080/1756073X.2022.2128273.

[64]Farman Ali, "The Contextualisation of Mary in the Catholics of Pakistan," *Practical Theology* 16, 6 (2023): 707–19. doi:10.1080/1756073X.2023.2270796.

[65]Farman Ali, Humaira Ahmad and Ambreen Salahuddin, "Christian Feminist Theology in Pakistan," *Feminist Theology* 31, 1 (2022), 9-19.

[66]Yousaf Sadiq, *The Contextualized Psalms (Punjabi Zabur): A Precious Heritage of the Global Punjabi Christian Community* (Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2020).

theology is needed—one that acknowledges Pakistani Christians' historical struggles, social conditions, and economic realities. This would not only help redefine Christian identity in Pakistan but also strengthen interfaith relations with the Muslim majority. Christian leaders and theologians must reassess their approach by moving away from imported Western traditions and fostering a theologically sound, culturally relevant, and socially transformative vision. Addressing caste-based discrimination, economic marginalization, and denominational fragmentation requires a holistic theological reform that integrates faith, heritage, and national belonging, ensuring that Christianity in Pakistan flourishes as a truly indigenous tradition**.**

5. Conclusion

The history of Christianity in Pakistan reflects a complex interplay of missionary expansion, socio-economic struggles, caste-based discrimination, and identity fragmentation. From its pre-colonial roots to the British missionary era, Christianity in the region developed largely through group conversions, particularly among the *chūhrā* caste. While these conversions created a significant Christian population, they also reinforced caste-based divisions, keeping many Punjabi Christians in marginalized socio-economic positions. Post-Partition, the loss of land-based livelihoods forced many Christians into sanitation work, further entrenching occupational stereotypes. Meanwhile, denominational schisms and internal power struggles weakened Christian unity, while Western cultural influences distanced the community from mainstream Pakistani society. Christian identity remains unresolved, as the labels of religion, ethnicity, and nationality each carry social limitations. To overcome these challenges, Pakistani Christians must engage in theological contextualization, developing a faith that aligns with local culture and societal realities. A renewed Christian identity, rooted in social inclusion, economic empowerment, and interfaith dialogue, is essential for a more integrated and resilient community. Addressing historical marginalization, fostering unity, and redefining Christian identity within Pakistan's socio-political framework will determine the future of the Christian community in the country.

Conflict of Interest

The manuscript authors have absolutely no financial or non-financial conflict of interest regarding the subject matter or material discussed in this manuscript.

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